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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the differences between those customers in two types of day care centers who are highly satisfied and who are not. Half were supported by client fees, and half used other sources of funding, e.g. tax support, and private philanthropic support. Parents and teachers of 100 children in day care centers in four different communities were interviewed. Sixty-nine percent were highly satisfied and 31% were not. The group not highly satisfied tended to have more education. Satisfied parents had used the same center longer than the not satisfied group. The highly satisfied parents gave a parent-related reason for using the center, while the not highly satisfied group were seeking the center for child enrichment. Although the groups differed little in goals for the day care program, highly satisfied parents were somewhat more interested in socialization and custody and the not satisfied tended to emphasize information and stimulation. Even though satisfied clients had more frequent staff-client interaction, the not highly satisfied involved themselves more in agency decision making. The study concludes that the not highly satisfied minority may constitute an important potential ally for child welfare planners in upgrading the level of day care service. (DJ)

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DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HIGHLY SATISFIED AND NOT HIGHLY SATISFIED CLIENTS OF DAY CARE CENTERS

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DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HIGHLY SATISFIED AND
NOT HIGHLY SATISFIED CLIENTS OF DAY CARE CENTERS

Despite the growing emphasis on client involvement in agency decision making there have been relatively few systematic investigations of the attitudes, expectations and perceptions of client groups. Yet the subject should be of considerable interest to professional social workers and social planners and policy makers. Social agency clients today are no longer merely passive recipients of a service designed by professionals to meet presumed needs but can become active participants in their own destiny. In the latter role, clients can wield increasing power to shape agency policy in line with what they perceive as their needs and as the best methods to meet them.

The shifting relationship between clients and agencies raises a number of questions and issues. For instance, clients demonstrate a wide spectrum of involvement with agency decision making. A minority, possibly a growing one, are extremely active, often within the agency and in broad guage politically oriented client groups as well. Another group continues to remain passive despite the efforts of many professionals to stimulate them to assume a more active role. One of the important questions is to discover the determinants of client involvement in agency decision making. What is the relationship, if any, between client expectations and satisfaction with service and active involvement with shaping agency policy? To what extent does such a relationship depend on prior and intervening factors, such as demographic characteristics, e.g. race, sex, education, and income of the

client, or on situational factors, e.g. type of agency, degree of dependence of the client on agency service, scarcity of alternative resources, and so forth?

Knowledge of client expectations and perceptions is equally essential to enable the professional to design a rational response to the changing process of agency decision making. The client point of view was a less crucial input so long as agency policy was dictated on the basis of professional expertise. Today, however, the professional has increasingly become just one of several competing power groups within the agency. Accordingly, he must master a variety of new strategies, including that of forming coalitions and alliances with other groups who are most likely to share his expectations and goals. One of the implications of this development is that the professional must learn to differentiate the client group. Since clients are propelled by different circumstances to seek service from a social agency, we should expect that their goals and sources of satisfaction would differ. We would expect that some would be more attune to professional expectations and constitute natural allies whereas others would seek alliances elsewhere. In order for the professional to function effectively within this new framework, he needs a variety of new knowledge including an understanding of differences between various segments of the client population.

Accordingly, recent interest in client expectations and satisfactions as a subject for investigation is a welcome development but the area remains a relatively "neglected" subject in social work research, as Mayer and Timms so aptly point out.[1] Too often, the subject is only peripheral

to the author's interest.[2] For instance, Scott Briar reports unexpectedly passive and favorable reactions of clients to the procedures involved in applying for AFDC but does not extend his analysis to encompass differences between clients holding majority and minority viewpoints.[3,4] Handler, in his fascinating study of the administration of welfare services in Wisconsin, finds that, although the majority of clients expressed positive attitudes towards discussions with caseworkers about a variety of topics such as children, home care, social life and budget counseling, a minority of recipients reported being "bothered or annoyed" by such discussions.[5] It would be extremely interesting to know what other differences may exist between clients who expressed positive and negative attitudes. For instance, were clients' attitudes generalized or specific, i.e. were the same clients bothered by discussions about social life and budget counseling or were these different groups of clients? Were clients with negative attitudes relatively recent public assistance applicants who may not yet have become accustomed to the demands of the welfare system or were they long term clients who had gradually become "fed up" with the system? Was the satisfied or the dissatisfied client more likely to involve himself actively with agency decision making? These questions were not the major focus of Handler's study but they could provide important input for agency administrators and policy planners.

In contrast to the above, Mayer and Timms' study does focus on satisfied and dissatisfied clients and provides a rich, human source of case material which offers considerable insight into client dissatisfaction. However, the authors did not set out and make no attempt to provide a systematic,

empirical investigation of background differences between the two groups of clients and of their effects on agency operations. The present study, although highly exploratory and tentative does attempt to provide systematic data on some of the questions posed above and its modest findings may help to fill an important void in social welfare research until more definitive studies can be carried out.

Day Care Parents as a Client Group

In order to evaluate the results of this study, it is important to call attention to some of the special characteristics of day care parents as a client group. In contrast to recipients of public assistance, clients of day care centers are less dependent on the agency service. Public assistance clients usually have no alternatives when they apply for aid. Users of day care service, on the other hand, usually have access to other day care centers than the one they are using and to alternative forms of child care such as baby sitters and informal arrangements with relatives and friends. Accordingly, we would expect that day care parents would include few if any seriously dissatisfied members. Dissatisfied day care clients would tend to withdraw their children from an arrangement to which they have serious objections. We can see this pattern in the present study. Sixty-nine percent of the parents interviewed said that they were highly satisfied with the current arrangement and 31% admitted to being less than highly satisfied. Very few of the latter said that they were seriously dissatisfied. Among clients of public assistance agencies, we might expect to find more marked negative attitudes because some clients may resent some aspects of our public welfare system and yet have no opportunity to

go elsewhere.[6] On the other hand, we might find less overt expression of dissatisfaction among public assistance clients because such clients may feel more dependent on the goodwill of the caseworker, especially in order to obtain allowances for extras not included in the usual minimum budget.[7] Clients in day care centers have less to lose by freely voicing their dissatisfaction. In public assistance agencies clients may well fear that their negative comments might get back to the agency despite interviewer assurances of confidentiality. They might also fail to express dissatisfaction because their mechanism for coping with the unpleasant realities of public assistance might be to deny their existence. In other words, it is difficult to equate client groups in different types of settings.

On the other hand, a study of the expectations of day care clients may be particularly appropriate because this type of agency has certain organizational characteristics that would help to make productive client involvement a reality rather than a vague ideal. Day care centers tend to be relatively small, independent organizations. Decision making is clearly localized, usually in the director, and quite visible to client groups.[8] In contrast, public assistance agencies are part of a mammoth bureaucratic structure. Clients know that decisions affecting their welfare are not made by the caseworker alone and yet they have no contact with "those at the top" whose permission is required.[9] Therefore, in one sense, a study of day care clients permits us to speculate what might happen if organizational realities in major public welfare agencies permitted real client input in decision making.

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The Study

The purpose of the current study was to look at selected characteristics of two groups of clients; those highly satisfied and those not highly satisfied with the day care service they were receiving. Parents of 100 children enrolled in day care centers in four different communities were interviewed. Usually the interview was conducted with the mother but occasionally with the father or with both. In the latter case the responses were combined so that there is one set of "parent" responses per child.

Half the parents used centers which were supported almost exclusively by client fees, e.g. commercial, private non-profit centers and half used centers which depended primarily on other sources of funding, e.g. tax support, private philanthropic support such as United Funds. For each parent included in the sample, the teacher of the child was also interviewed. The reason for this design was to test the hypothesis that parental satisfaction is related to consensus regarding goals of service between teachers and parents.

The results will be reported in three sections. In the first, we will look at what might be considered antecedent factors, i.e. differences in background of the two groups of clients, why they chose the center, and what they are paying to obtain the service. In the second section we will attempt to analyze some of the bases for client dissatisfaction in terms of expectations and the extent to which clients think their expectations are being met. In the last section, we will deal with differences between the highly satisfied and not highly satisfied client group in terms of their involvement with the center, i.e. their patterns of interaction with staff. Finally, we will indicate some of the implications of our findings for social welfare specialists who are involved with planning and implementing day care and other social services.

Findings

A total of 69 out of the 100 parents interviewed described themselves as highly satisfied and 31 said that they were not highly satisfied. A check question in which respondents were asked whether they would select the same center again if they had free choice provided corroborating information.

1. Differences in antecedent factors distinguishing the two groups of clients.

An examination of background factors yielded surprisingly few striking differences between the two groups. Both sets of clients were similar in race (three-quarters or more of both groups were white), in level of mother's occupation (about half of each group were in a medium level occupation category according to census bureau classification, i.e. predominantly clerical and sales) and in terms of family income (about half of each group made less than $7,500 and half made more). The groups were almost identical in the proportion using user supported (private non-profit, and proprietary) and non-user supported day care centers and in the amount of fees paid for the service. The latter two factors are not necessarily correlated since some non user supported centers used a sliding fee scale so that the range of fees paid for their service was quite large.

One of the main differences between the two groups of clients was in mother's education. The not highly satisfied group tended to have a higher level of education. Fifty-eight percent of the not highly satisfied mothers had graduated from high school or gone beyond whereas only 38% of the highly satisfied mothers had achieved a comparable level of education. Not surprisingly, the highly satisfied parents had used the center longer

than the comparison group. Sixty percent of the highly satisfied parents had used the same center for at least one year, whereas only 45% of the not highly satisfied had used the center for that length of time.*

One of the interesting findings of the study was that the two groups differed somewhat in the reasons given for using a day care center. Seventy-two percent of the highly satisfied parents gave a "parent related reason" for using a day care center, i.e. parent is working or studying, parent wants more free time for himself, whereas only 61% of the not highly satisfied parents did so. Conversely, more of the not highly satisfied parents gave a "child related reason" for using a day care center, i.e. parent wants enrichment for the child, wants child to be with other children, wants the child to obtain help for special problems, or felt that the child did not benefit from baby sitters in the home.* The importance of this last point will become clearer in the following section when we compare the two groups in terms of their expectations of the day care service.

2. Differences in expectations of the two groups of clients.

In order to determine what parents expected of the day care service and the extent to which their expectations coincided with those of day care staff who provided the service, each parent and his corresponding teacher was asked to rank in the order of their importance the following set of five goals for day care.

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*None of the differences in antecedent factors reached a level of statistical significance of $< .05$ when tested with a X^2.

(1) To give the child basic information, e.g. the letters of the alphabet, numbers, names of colors, etc.

(2) To give the child training in socialization so that he will know how to get along in school and with other children.

(3) To give the child good custody, i.e. meeting standards of care and protection.

(4) To give the child therapy, i.e. to find out about and help him with emotional and other personal problems.

(5) To stimulate the child's natural creativity and curiosity.

The ratings were consolidated into three "levels of importance," high, medium, and low. Goals which had been ranked first or second were considered to have a high level of importance; the goal ranked third was considered to have a medium level of importance; the goals ranked fourth or fifth were considered to have a low level of importance. The consolidation of rankings was designed to reflect the uncertainty of parents about the relative importance of the two highest and the two lowest ranked goals. For the purposes of this paper, our concern is only with the high rankings. Since the 100 parents each gave two high rankings, there were a total of 200 high rankings, distributed as shown in table 1.

Insert Table 1 Here

Although the differences are not statistically significant, they suggest some interesting interpretations. Highly satisfied parents tended to give higher rankings to socialization and custody than the not highly satisfied group. The latter, on the other hand, put greater emphasis on information and, especially on stimulation. The goals emphasized by the highly satisfied group showed a lower level of expectation than that of

Table 1

PERCENTAGE OF HIGH RANKINGS FOR EACH TYPE OF GOAL
BY LEVEL OF PARENTAL SATISFACTION

Goal Given High Ranking	Client Group: Highly Satisfied	Client Group: Not Highly Satisfied	Total
Information	9% (13)	11% (7)	10% (20)
Socialization	34% (47)	28% (17)	32% (64)
Custody	35% (48)	26% (16)	32% (64)
Therapy	9% (13)	6% (4)	8.5% (17)
Stimulation	13% (17)	29% (18)	17.5% (35)
TOTAL	100% (138)	100% (62)	100% (200)

X^2 not significant at $p < .05$

the not highly satisfied group. Care and custody is a minimal type goal that is implicit in licensing standards that most centers are required to meet. Socialization, as that goal was interpreted by most parents, required nothing more than that the child have an opportunity to interact with a group of peers, an expectation that is almost inevitably met by his being in a day care center.

The goals of information and stimulation, however, pre-suppose a higher level of service that is more in line with the expectations of day care experts.[10] Thus it would seem that the expectation of the highly satisfied parents are more consistent with the warehousing principle,[11] (with emphasis on custody and socialization) whereas those of the not highly satisfied parents are more sophisticated (with greater emphasis on stimulation and information) and more similar to those enunciated by the Child Welfare League of America.[12]*

These differences are consistent with the previously mentioned findings concerning reasons parents gave for using day care. The highly satisfied clients seem to have sent their children because the service was convenient for their plans, and they expected little else. The not highly satisfied group used day care services to obtain specific benefits for their children. Their rankings indicate that they expected considerably more than a warehousing service.

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*When differences between the two groups of parents are tested along this single dimension (expectations consistent with those of child welfare experts, i.e. information, stimulation, and therapy versus expectations not consistent with expert opinion, i.e. custody and socialization) differences result in X^2 of 5, 1 df, $p. < .05$.

Was client satisfaction related to the degree that they perceived that their expectations were being met by the day care centers? Answers to this question were sought indirectly by asking each parent to select among the five possible goals the one that he thought the child's teacher stressed the most. If he selected as the teacher's main goal one that he himself had ranked high (placed first or second when asked his expectations of day care), we assumed that this reflected a high degree of perceived teacher-parent consensus on goals, which, in turn suggested that the parent felt that his expectations were being met reasonably well.

As might have been expected, the highly satisfied parents indicated a high level of perceived consensus more frequently than the not highly satisfied group. Seventy-five percent of the highly satisfied parents and 58% of the not highly satisfied group showed a high level of perceived teacher-parent consensus regarding goals of day care.

Although differences are in the expected direction, the overall pattern shows a relatively high level of perceived consensus among both groups of clients, which is consistent with our earlier remark that parents were, on the whole, rather satisfied with the service. However, the high level of perceived consensus and differences favoring the highly satisfied group of clients is not consistent with our data on actual teacher-parent consensus on goals of day care. In order to determine actual consensus, we obtained a score representing the absolute sum of the differences in rankings between parents and the corresponding teacher. This sum could range from 0 (representing complete agreement) to 12 (representing maximum disagreement). Both the highly satisfied and the not highly satisfied

parents had identical average scores in actual consensus regarding goals. The common mean of 8.2 showed that actual consensus was rather low.* In other words, the highly satisfied client group do not really agree with staff on the relative importance of various goals any more than the not highly satisfied parent group. Client satisfaction does not seem to be related to actual consensus even though it is related to perceived consensus.[13]

Under the circumstances, why do highly satisfied parents perceive more consensus between themselves and teachers than the not highly satisfied group of parents? The question suggests an examination of client-staff patterns of communication. It seems possible that either the highly satisfied clients communicate less frequently with staff or that the content of their communication precludes discussion of issues that might reveal underlying differences in goals and expectations. These questions directed us to a study of differences between the two client groups in their pattern of involvement with agency decision making, to be discussed in the next section.

3. Differences in involvement with agency decision making between highly satisfied and not highly satisfied parents.

One of the most important questions in this study was to determine what the not highly satisfied client did about his dissatisfaction. Did he tend to withdraw from involvement with the agency, reasoning that efforts to modify the source of his dissatisfaction would be futile, or did his dissatisfaction spur him to greater involvement than the highly satisfied group, who were more satisfied with the existing situation?

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*The Standard Deviation for the not highly satisfied group was 3.4 whereas that of the highly satisfied group was 2.8, showing that the former differed more internally on this measure of consensus than the latter.

In order to determine which of these equally plausible lines of reasoning more closely corresponds with the reality in our sample group, we investigated three dimensions of client-staff interaction: frequency of interaction, the party that tended to initiate the interactions, and the content of interactions. Our first finding was that the not highly satisfied parent interacted significantly less frequently with staff than the highly satisfied parent group, thus suggesting support for the withdrawal hypothesis. Eighty percent of the highly satisfied parents reported that they spoke to staff members at least once a week whereas only 55% of the not highly satisfied parents interacted with staff as often. However, this finding cannot tell us whether these observed differences are due to differences between the two client groups in their willingness to initiate interaction with staff or to differences in staff response to client initiated interactions. Accordingly, parents were asked to report whether they or the teachers tended to initiate most of the interactions or whether each initiated about half the interactions. The results of this question are shown in table 2.

Insert table 2

This table shows that the not highly satisfied parents reported initiating interactions with staff more frequently (39% vs. 23%) than the highly satisfied client group. The highly satisfied group reported generally that both parties initiated interaction about equally. Teacher initiated interactions were minimal among both groups of parents. Although this data does not tell us whether the main difference between the not highly satisfied and the highly satisfied group was that parents were initiating interactions more or teachers were initiating interaction less with the former than with the latter group of clients, the picture becomes somewhat clearer when these two dimensions of interaction are combined in table 3.

Insert table 3 15

Table 2

INITIATOR OF INTERACTION BY LEVEL OF PARENTAL SATISFACTION

Client Group

Initiator of Interaction	Highly Satisfied	Not Highly Satisfied	Total
Parent	23% (16)	39% (12)	28% (25)
Teacher	7% (5)	10% (3)	8% (8)
Equal	70% (48)	52% (16)	64% (64)
TOTAL	100% (69)	100% (31)	100% (100)

Using a X^2 test, these differences are not significant at $p < .05$

Table 3

FREQUENCY OF INTERACTION BY PARTY THAT GENERALLY INITIATED INTERACTION

Frequency	Initiator			
	Parent	Teacher	Equal	Total
Once a week or more	36% (10)	63% (5)	89% (57)	72% (72)
Less than once a week	64% (18)	37% (3)	11% (7)	28% (28)
TOTAL	100% (28)	100% (8)	100% (64)	100% (100)

$X^2=27.5$, 2 df, $p < .05$

These data suggest that differences are largely due to teachers because they show that parent initiated interactions were much more frequent where client-staff interactions were less frequent (64% vs. 36%). It seems as though the not highly satisfied client group were actively attempting to initiate opportunities for interaction with staff and that staff were withdrawing from interaction with the not highly satisfied client group. Possibly, the not highly satisfied parents were rather vocal in their complaints and were seen by staff as a nuisance. Therefore, instead of encouraging additional interaction with the not highly satisfied parent group by initiating interaction as they did with the highly satisfied group of parents, staff attempted to keep interaction to a minimum by engaging themselves primarily when the parent took the initiative.

Finally, we have support for the hypothesis that the not highly satisfied client group attempted to involve themselves actively in agency decision making from data concerning content of staff-client interactions. Parents in our study were asked what they talked to teachers about and the content was classified by frequency of occurrence and by type of subject, i.e. whether it involved discussion only about the parents' own child, about rules of the center, about peripheral issues, (such as planning parties for special events), or about central policy issues, (such as educational program and criteria for hiring of personnel). We found that, except for discussion related to the individual child, which occurred in both client groups frequently and about equally, that the not highly satisfied group reported more discussion related to other types of content, in all three categories of subject matter than the highly satisfied parents. It would

seem that although the highly satisfied clients may have more frequent staff-client interaction than the not highly satisfied group, that the latter were nevertheless more actively and meaningfully involved in agency decision making, and indeed represented the more activist element among the client population.

Implications and Conclusion

Our study shows that among this sample of day care parents only about 1/3 were less than highly satisfied but they are a group whose importance may be greater than their numbers. They are more educated than the highly satisfied group. They are more likely to use the services for reasons relating to the well being of their children, rather than as a convenience for themselves and they have more sophisticated expectations of day care service than the highly satisfied group. Whereas the latter place major emphasis on good care and custody and giving the child a group experience, the former ask that the service provide education and stimulation for their child.

Thus the not highly satisfied minority may constitute an important potential ally for the child welfare planner who is attempting to upgrade the level of day care service. Not only do the not highly satisfied clients share many of the goals and expectations of the experts but they are also willing to make an effort to implement their objectives. Our data suggest that the not highly satisfied group are taking more responsibility for initiating client-staff interaction than the highly satisfied group and that they are attempting to make such interaction more meaningful in terms of

influencing basic agency policy decisions. The similarity of viewpoint between a vocal, activist minority client group and the welfare professional has been noted in other contexts.[14] One of the central questions raised by this study is the following: Should the professional who is committed to helping the client shape agency service to meet his needs follow the lead of the activist minority, whose aims may be more consistent with his own, or should he follow the expectations of the passive majority whose views may be seriously at variance with his professional objectives?

The dilemma posed by the above formulation may become increasingly urgent in the future. As yet, no ready solutions present themselves. Much will depend on future trends in client expectations. As clients become accustomed to playing an active role in agency decision making will their expectations rise as they see a return for their efforts? Will the rising educational level of the American population be reflected in more sophisticated expectations among clients of social agencies? Will the low level of expectations of the majority become more visible as a result of greater client involvement and serve as an obstacle to raising the quality of agency service?

These are important questions and the research reported here can offer no answers. The main aim of this paper has been to raise some of the underlying issues in the hope that they will encourage others to carry out much needed research on the "neglected client."

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